

Cornville charter school to appoint board members

The school was the only charter school in Maine with an elected board, and school officials say the change is not related to the resignation of two board members.

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The Cornville Regional Charter School will begin appointing rather than electing school board members after a change to the school's bylaws was approved by the Maine Charter School Commission.

Principal Travis Works and Jean Walker, chairwoman of the board of directors, said Cornville had been the only charter school in Maine with an elected rather than appointed board.

The change comes as the school is beginning the process of its first charter renewal and on the heels of the resignation of founding executive director, Justin Belanger.

School board members Carrie Tessier and Rosie Vanadestine also resigned in early December, but Walker said their departures were unrelated to the change, but that it has been something the board has been talking about since last year and was encouraged by the state charter commission..

Tessier declined to comment and Vanadestine did not respond to requests for comment.

Works said the charter commission's recommendation in the past had been to have a wide variety of people on the board and not just parents.

“When you (elected board members), you typically just had parents that were board members, so this way the board can diversify to meet certain needs,” he said. “For example, having someone with a strong finance or legal background. It helps you bring in those areas of expertise.”

While the seven-member board now has two parents and one vacancy, Tessier, one of the members who resigned, is a parent, and the board also has been parent-heavy in the past, Works and Walker said.

Most schools in Maine have school boards that are made up of representatives from the communities whose students attend the school, elected during municipal elections. School boards often include parents as well.

Charter schools, while they are public schools, operate independently of the traditional school district system and often are founded to offer more flexibility or creativity in the curriculum.

One way they differ from traditional public schools is that students come from a wider geographic area — something that officials said does not lend itself to the traditional election process for a school board. In Cornville, for example, students come from 16 communities, Works said.

Initially the board of the Cornville school, [which opened in 2012 as Maine’s first charter elementary school](#), was made up of “anyone we could find,” Walker said. She said that over time, the role of the board of directors has become clearer.

“In the beginning, we were cleaning and painting bathrooms, doing anything that needed to be done to get the school up and running,” she said. “I think ... we understand now what everyone’s roles are, what our roles are as a board and what other people’s roles are.”

With a board made up predominantly of parents, it can be hard to separate a vision for the school from a parent’s vision for his or her own child, Walker said.

“The whole school is based so much on voice — on children having a voice in their learning, on teachers having a voice in how the curriculum should be driven; and we wanted to give that same opportunity to people that were choosing to come to the school,” she said. “But it’s really difficult when you have a majority (of board members) that might be parents.”

A founding member of the school, Walker attended the National Charter School Convention last year, where she said she learned that most boards of charter schools have the goal of achieving diversity on their boards. “That doesn’t necessarily mean racial diversity, but gender and the types of jobs people do too,” she said, as well as a mix of parents and non-parents.

There is also an expectation at some charter schools that board members contribute money to the school or assist with fundraising, though Walker said that is not the case in Cornville.

“Obviously we would like to see someone come on the board who says, ‘I have a million dollars I want to donate,’ although that’s not what we envisioned for our school,” she said.